

Testimony from Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven, MD
IN SUPPORT of SB 63

I am writing in strong support of the above bill. As a family doctor who has worked in primary care in different countries around the world for the past 25 years, including Canada, England, South Africa, and the United States (in Hartford since 2004), I understand how universally difficult it is for people to decide to take time off work when they are sick.

Aside from the very personal nature of these decisions, I would like to draw the legislature's attention to the public health implications of sick people's choices that affect all of us.

Going to work sick does not make public health or economic sense. Productivity goes down when people are unwell; and, if contagious, the risk to fellow employees, employers, and even clients is significant. Many scholars are predicting a resurgence of pandemic flu, like the 1918 Spanish Flu, which killed millions globally.

The H1N1 pandemic of last summer and fall demonstrates more clearly than ever the urgent need to allow people to stay home when they are sick. We should all be grateful that the H1N1 outbreak wasn't worse. All the same, we shouldn't downplay its significance; after all, dozens in Connecticut died from the illness.

New data suggest that 8 million Americans came to work while infected with the novel H1N1 strain this past fall – and that employees without paid sick days were much more likely to come to work while sick. An estimated 7 million employees in America caught the H1N1 virus from a sick coworker. While broader access to paid sick days could not completely eliminate the practice of going to work sick, it would substantially reduce its frequency.

The precarious economic environment is driving people to go to work sick. In this recession, low-wage workers are hit particularly hard; more than ever, we need a 'safety net' to protect sick employees and the public health at this crucial juncture. When people are at risk of losing employment, they will do anything to hold on to their jobs. Without a guarantee of paid sick days, there will be serious job stress with the potential for poor judgment when deciding whether to stay home or go to work, making all of us more vulnerable.

Inappropriate health-seeking behavior is strongly correlated with the non-availability of paid sick days. It is four times more likely that people without paid sick leave will seek health care in episodic, inappropriate ways. These include emergency room visits, which ultimately generate more costs for the health care system. Mandating paid sick leave is an important step in ensuring access to primary health care for everyone, and is therefore a crucial step in the bigger picture of health care reform.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments; and, it is my sincere hope that this legislation passes the Assembly today. It will be a victory for rational public health policy.